

ONLINE COUNSELLING: BEYOND THE PROS & CONS

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The rapidly expanding field of online counselling has aroused much discussion among clinicians who are quick to compare in-person sessions with the online variations. However, the shift from in-person to online practice is not just a matter of duplicating therapist/client face-to-face (f2f) transactions through a computer screen. Rather, it is analogous to the difference between literature and the oral tradition.

Although there are many forms of online counseling and the practice has been comprehensively reviewed elsewhere (e.g., Alleman, 2002; Maheu & Gordon, 2000), this article focuses specifically on the advantages and challenges of a particular brand of "e-therapy:" the short-term, text-based relationship facilitated by e-mail exchanges. This model has a unique approach, methodology and therapeutic orientation.

Because the scope and occupational hazards of online counselling are still being discovered and explored by its practitioners, a comprehensive evaluation of its effectiveness is not yet possible. Moreover, early research is in progress and is beginning to yield some tentative conclusions, which will become more solid after additional research is conducted in the years to come (Rochlen, Zack & Speyer, in press).

Nevertheless, hundreds of mental health professionals around the world have begun delivering online services and a clearly articulated theory of online counseling is beginning to coalesce. For now, we are able to look at anecdotal evidence and discern some key benefits and "best practices" based on the experience of clinicians over the past ten years.

Advantages

The advantages of online counseling are numerous. The most obvious advantages relate to convenience and increased access but there are unique therapeutic benefits (rarely mentioned in discussions of online counseling) to working online as well.

Online counselling offers convenience and remote access, serving clients with limited mobility, time restrictions, or anyone seeking help who is reluctant to see a counsellor in-person. It makes keeping appointments at a specific time and place unnecessary. The receptionist and voice mail are bypassed and contact can transcend geographical boundaries and time zones.

Online counselling provides help to many who would not otherwise receive it: those in remote areas; those travelling and re-locating in foreign countries, with a possible language barrier; the physically disabled or housebound (or their caregivers); and others "too busy" to arrange yet another appointment.

Another noteworthy aspect of online counselling is its *perceived privacy*. Some individuals still feel a stigma attached to visiting "a shrink." Others may be phobic, trapped in abusive situations, or merely shy and afraid to face someone. The counsellor's physical absence diminishes the client's initial "shame" or need to "save face" while presenting a problem. Some would say that shame is grist for the therapeutic mill, but not if the grain never gets to the barn! Many clients appreciate the "disinhibiting effect" of not being seen in-person (Joinson, 1998; Fink, 1999).

The psyche of the client is freed for therapeutic self-reflection in many other ways. Beyond providing a sense of privacy, the disinhibiting effect of not being seen also allows the client to quickly hone in on the core issue. Behind the scenes and static of personalities, social masks are unnecessary. Online counsellors have found that text-based self-disclosure can have the effect of inducing a high degree of intimacy and honesty from the first exchange of e-mails. Many clients present themselves in a 'naked' way, without their usual in-person defenses. The power differential (Owen, 1995) is diminished as well because both parties are contributing to shared texts. They become co-architects of how the client chooses to build on or deconstruct present insights.

Once ongoing online contact between client and therapist has been established, both parties enter what Suler (2000) has termed the "*zone of reflection.*" The asynchronous (time-delayed) *e-mail exchange slows down the process and allows both parties to pay close attention to their own thoughts and feelings while still engaged in a dialogue.*

The client's inclination to ventilate is naturally channeled by the need to frame thoughts in writing. The act of composing, which often includes re-reading and reviewing what is written on both sides, leads naturally to externalizing and re-framing, thereby increasing objectivity. Even before the counsellor's perspective is added to the exchange, the client can become more 'composed.' He or she may learn subliminally the therapeutic value of witnessing an issue without being overwhelmed by the emotions associated with it. Pennebaker (1997) has researched and written extensively about the therapeutic benefits of writing about emotional experiences.

In the act of e-mailing, new associations, memories, and insights arise in the contemplative atmosphere of 'getting it down in writing.' Creative solitude and silence are integral to the process. As one practitioner observed, "In an in-person session, you may talk for an hour and not get to the heart of the matter. On the other hand, an online counselling client may sit in silence for an hour and then say more in one typed line than she has ever revealed to anyone."

Furthermore, *the client enjoys a certain degree of ownership in the process.* He or she is able to set the pace, tone, volume, and parameters of self-disclosure without the "threat of the furrowed brow" or other subtle leads, positive or negative. The computer screen provides safety and containment with its built-in borders. The client is in control of the 'send' button. All of this encourages mindfulness of the client's inner life. The presence and point of view of the 'author' becomes engaged in the re-reading and re-authoring called forth in the course of counselling.

The presenting problem is externalized while the helper is internalized. Both these time-honored therapeutic values are naturally enhanced by the medium and the closeness/distance of those involved in it. As the therapeutic bond strengthens and evolves, the text stands as a testament to increased self-awareness.

Along those lines, *the client can always (even years hence) re-read, rehearse, and reinforce the solutions and resolutions it contains.* When the client has "words to hold onto," hope is established. With many clients, this is literally true. They carry printouts in their pockets, purses, and briefcases. In this way, online counselling becomes an open-ended, ongoing session with "healing words" accessible at any time. Contributing to the flow of the dialogue are exchanges enriched by a wealth of literary methods: the use of

metaphor; role-playing that illuminates attitudes of self and others; and the evocation of voices that reflect the client's "self-talk."

Another advantage of online counselling is the *accountability* facilitated by the medium. It makes expert and peer consultation, as well as ongoing supervision, available "mid-session."

Challenges

Naturally, online counseling comes with many challenges, quick to be seized upon by skeptics. Here, we outline the primary concerns as well as some that have not been discussed previously:

Increased accessibility is no panacea; such easy access involves some risk. The expanded base of potential clients made possible through online counselling raises the question of its clinical limitations. Who can be effectively treated online? In many settings, web-based intake procedures have been designed expressly to screen out candidates who would be better served offline. The initial online assessments are designed to triage issues involving violence, domestic or otherwise, active suicidal ideation, serious substance abuse, or an immediate and urgent crisis. Clients in these categories may still be "seen" online en route to more appropriate resources, and they may well view the online contact as a crucial transition, or a buffer zone to relieve desperation. Yet it is generally agreed that these clients are not ideal for service that takes place entirely online (Suler et al, 2001; Stofle, 2001). Furthermore, new technology does not justify the eradication of necessary boundaries inherent in cultures and social systems. Ease of access may be secondary if a client's needs are compromised by conflicts of interest or misunderstandings.

Hence, online professionals must always understand and appreciate the limited nature of the medium. They need to:

- assess the suitability of clients and work within ethical parameters
- educate clients and provide informed consent
- advise clients regarding limitations
- have back-up resources in place to address urgent issues

Ultimately, *both parties must have trust and confidence in the medium for it to work well*. Lack of trust in the medium begins with technical threats to security and confidentiality and extends to the risk of a client taking the counsellor 'at his word' and running quite far with it in the wrong direction. Therefore, beyond the nature and suitability of the clinical problem, the medium brings its own requirements:

- *The counsellor and client must be comfortable with the technological platform underpinning the online counseling process.* Counselors must be circumspect in using secure technology for communication, and possess sufficient technical expertise to cope with unforeseen exigencies, skills that have not been part of the traditional turf of most counsellors until now.
- *The counsellor and client must be reasonably good writers and typists.* Clients must be comfortable with what is essentially a letter-writing process. They must

be able to express their thoughts and feelings clearly, and to interpret messages carefully, with a willingness to 'give the benefit of the doubt' when humour or the intended meanings miss the mark. Online counselling is best suited to those who are capable of sustained introspection, value written self-expression, and have the creative independence it takes to hold up their end of the written dialogue.

Asynchronicity allows reflection, but can also breed misunderstandings. One drawback of online counselling is the absence of spontaneous clarification. Clients may not be self-validating enough to compensate for the loss of visual and auditory cues which would reassure them. On the counsellor's side, especially if training in text-based communication is lacking, important information about the client may remain "between the lines" with the real issues evading assessment. Even with the requisite skills on both sides, there are those who would find the middle ground of cyberspace more of a void than a healing sanctuary.

The room for error in assessment limits the counsellor to making *provisional* hypotheses, pending the client's response. The basics of expressing warmth, genuineness, and empathy continue to be the therapeutic priority.

In therapy, deficits can be advantageous. We have established that there are a number of challenges faced by online counselors. For example, the 'virtual' connection is open to a host of projections and seems to be the perfect template for transference and counter-transference (Gwinnell, 2003). However, in the tradition of good counselling, we find we are able to positively reframe many of the problems. The transparency of online relationships can provide opportunities to explore the client's irrational beliefs and distorted perceptions in the face of little nonverbal input. We can 'cut to the chase' of the client's thought processes, revealed in writing as visible 'self-talk.' As Suler (2002) states, "There is a special type of interpersonal empathy that is unique to text relationships. Some claim that text-only talk carries you past the distracting, superficial aspects of a person's existence and connects you more directly to the other's psyche."

Conclusions

"Telepresence" is "the illusion that a mediated experience is not mediated" (Lombard & Ditton, 1997), the feeling of being in someone's presence without sharing a physical space. When online counseling is at its best, and the positive conditions are in place, clients and therapists experience telepresence and are not only able to interact effectively, but engage in relationships that can offer something special indeed. Believe it or not, experiencing the online other as a genuine, caring person is not as difficult as it might seem.

Reeves and Nass (1996) explain that the tendency to disregard the artifice of the medium and feel we are 'really' making human contact, may be a matter of evolutionary hardwiring. Those who have tried their hand at online counseling quickly find this to be the case. In our experience, most skeptics have never attempted to conduct a personal relationship online (limiting email to business transactions, etc.).

No one claims that counselling in this medium will displace the need for face-to-face meetings, any more than the increase in virtual intimacy makes the embodied kind redundant. It is well known by anyone testing the waters of online dating that you do not

know who you are dealing with until you have met them in person. Many would apply that principle to the therapeutic relationship.

The scope and methods of online counselling in the hands of skilled practitioners is still in the pioneering stages. Yet we have already landed in a (brave) new world of counselling practice. We hope that this article will inspire curious clinicians to consider learning more about online counselling and to test the waters themselves. We hope we have shown that, beyond increasing accessibility for underserved populations, online counselling practice offers almost all clients a unique experience that easily stands on its own merit. The clients themselves say it best, with their voluntary feedback after cases are completed:

“After my first exchange with my e-counsellor, I knew that I had made the right decision. He wrote in a tone so similar to mine that I immediately felt comfortable and dropped any inhibitions that I may have had. I was able to share thoughts and feelings with him that I know I wouldn’t have dared express in a face-to-face session. It was really like writing to an old friend. A really wise friend who knows when to challenge you and when to support you. I never knew that someone on the other side of my computer could mean so much to me as my e-counsellor.”

“My e- counsellor’s words were as comfortable and appropriate as my favourite sweat pants and sweatshirt on a cold night!”

“My last correspondence with my e-counsellor was a week ago now. I have printed off every written word we shared and I can’t tell you how many times I have gone back to those letters to re-read the words. The whole experience has been so much more than I expected it to be. I would recommend it to anyone who asked.” ☆

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